



## Fictions of Ambivalence

*Social Uneasiness and Violence in Crime Fiction*

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## **Fictions of Ambivalence Social Uneasiness and Violence in Crime Fiction**

*Kim Toft Hansen*

### **Abstract**

Scandinavian crime fiction is recurrently concerned with the conditions and violent interruptions of democracy and the welfare state. Henning Mankell's Wallander-series seems predominantly preoccupied by the disturbance of this idyllic scenery by violent acts. Something seems to be afoot and the Scandinavian welfare society seems to be suffering. The upper current in Henning Mankell's stories show an idyllic manifestation disrupted by an undercurrent of "Swedish uneasiness". Although democracy and social maintenance seem to be running well, underneath a violent anxiety dislocates the basic preconditions of a democratic welfare system.

Different models present various ways of analyzing these currencies of idyllic scenery and violent cruelty, which is very present in *Before the Frost*, both novel and film – the revolving points in this paper. The undercurrent of unease might be a cultural unconscious of suppressed guilt and anxiety, or it can be dealt with as a general way of delivering social critique through fiction. Nevertheless, the order of society and the democratic scenery is, in the narrative, muddled by religious problems with Christian roots. Correspondingly, this paper reflects upon the violent disruption of democracy and the ambivalent characteristics of both violence, the police officer Wallander and democracy.

**Key Words:** Crime fiction, violence, social uneasiness, democracy, welfare state, ambivalence.

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The narrative dispatch and initial disruption in most crime fiction is an act of violence. Violence is in itself not just a transgression of law and social order, but additionally it bridges into an integrated discussion about the relationship between structures of society on the one hand and the underlying principles of violent disruptions on the other. Violence in crime fiction, then, "stages a struggle between collective norms and individual transgression"<sup>1</sup> and, most importantly, the basic link in between the social system and the individual.

This paper examines the fictional representation of various categories of violence predominantly in Henning Mankell's *Before the Frost* – both novel and film – and the more wide-ranging social discussions about the disturbance of democracy and the welfare state in the contemporary Scandina-

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vian crime fiction tradition. In Mankell's novel, the basic social footing and idyllic upper current of society is disrupted by an under current of undemocratic mechanisms in a fundamental religious belief. Considering this crisis, I turn to a discussion about the ambivalence included in both Mankell's investigator Wallander as well as the structures of democracy.

### 1. Commencing Murder

Two separate acts of violence initiate the narrative in *Before the Frost*<sup>2</sup>. The police receive a number of calls concerning burning swans in the area, whereas the disappearance of a country side tracker, at first, draws the most attention. To begin with the two episodes are approached disconnected, though when the missing tracker turns up dead and police find the same type of patrol used to burn the swans at the scene of the crime the two incidents are immediately associated. At the crime scene the police as well locates a well read and note filled Bible which – combined with the ritually arranged body – seems to link the murder to religious aspects, but the case is nevertheless still quite cold.

Within the first part of the book or minutes of the cinematic adaptation a complicated series of questions – with more to come – has surfaced and a temporally displaced investigation can take its few first steps. The commencing feature is the extreme and ritually associated murder of the tracker, but there are, naturally, a few creative variations between the literary narrative and the cinematic version that mostly can be connected to the basic intentions of the two narratives. Whereas the literary version draws heavily on the new professional relationship between Mankell's recurring investigator Kurt Wallander and his apprenticed daughter Linda Wallander, the film quickly turns to the basic plot of the murder narrative. There are obviously various traits of character drama in the film, but the literary focus on the difficult family relationship is shoved into the background. *Before the Frost* is, from the hands of Mankell, in many ways an unusual police procedural with its rich focus on character drama, though character *is* a central feature to the Wallander novels. Basically the film version of *Before the Frost*, in fact, turns its narrative focus back to previous literary Wallander narratives where the murder or other violent acts most often take place within the first few pages. Nevertheless, the revolving point eventually becomes the murder<sup>3</sup>.

### 2. Direct Violence

Here, we establish the first type of violence present in *Before the Frost* which can be described as direct bodily harm. In crime fiction and, presumably, for crime readers or viewers there are certain fascinations with this type of violence and particularly the act of murder. If real life were to live up to Wallander's murderous world the small southern Swedish town of Ystad would soon be deserted. One reason for this complex relationship be-

tween attraction and repulsion of murder might have its cultural roots in the inviolable individual in Christian cultures and the lead to societal mobilization without taking the background of the harmed individual into consideration. Murderous violence is abominable whether the victim is class structurally high or low<sup>4</sup>.

A perhaps much more fundamental and apparent reason, though, might be the excessive extremity of murder. Not only is the excess of murder and violence aesthetically appealing, it is as well existentially out of the ordinary and the basic idea of murder probes the boundaries of human knowledge. The ultimate termination of the body constitutes a passage into the intellectually unknown which – in atheistic contrast to the religious aspects – becomes delightfully frightening. The appeal of murder is in itself a paradox. Yet both the religious inviolability of the human being on the one hand and the atheistically disrupting features of murder on the other ties together in a passionate interest in the incomprehensibility of death. This type of easily identifiable violence is dubbed by Slavoj Žižek as direct, physical and subjective violence: “violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatic crowds”<sup>5</sup>.

However, in *Before the Frost* and several additional narratives of crime, the disruption of the body is not only characterized as an individual death, but murder and violence is depicted as an uneasiness dislocating the idyllic scenery of the, at first sight, harmonious locale<sup>6</sup>. In the words of Edgar Allan Poe, an under current indefinite of meaning disturbs the upper current of the tranquil thesis<sup>7</sup>. The upper current is, in Poe’s general theory of communication, what the reader considers correct (a thesis), but the under current of meaning becomes evidently more and more clear throughout the communication or narrative. Perfect acts of communication, then, appear when the upper and under current correspond, which in the end is a functional description of how popular crime fiction generally works: The under current of suggestive meaning adjusts the upper current of hypothetical knowledge until the investigator can place the blame upon the guilty party.

A typical phrase recurrent in crime fiction where the under current peaks through the upper current from *Before the Frost* nicely illustrates this point: “As they drove through the darkness he had a vague glimpse of logic within what was happening, though he could not yet account for what it actually meant”<sup>8</sup>. This narratological description of crime fiction can, subsequently, be extrapolated onto the extensive intention of Mankell’s novels as descriptions of Swedish uneasiness. The surface of the Swedish society – in Mankell’s view – appears as an idyllic manifestation, but violent outburst and social anxiety erupts from underneath. As a result, Mankell’s crime fiction narratives – here illustrated by *Before the Frost* – become metaphors for more socially interested narratives that “explore the overdetermination of violence, and [...] assert a solidaristic response to violence”<sup>9</sup>. The central

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issue, in this case, is how this is established and what the end results of these disruptions are.

### 3. Democratic Dystopia

An interesting aspect considering *Before the Frost* as both a novel and a film is the basic difference between the investigative endings. Although the narratives are quite similar, the closing of the two are ultimately different. In both stories the initial murder and the succeeding criminal actions are committed or at least incited by the leader of a conservative Biblical cult intending the re-creation of a doctrinal rule in Sweden. Accordingly, this small fraction of believers rejects the secular, democratic rule of society in the attempt to overrun, at first, the modern Swedish church, and secondly the Swedish society.

A supplementary element of suspense is established as a friend of Wallander's daughter, Anna, is involved. The cult leader turns out to be her father that was thought to have died in the Jim Jones mass suicide in Jonestown in 1978. Apparently, he survived to start the religious cult fraction in Sweden that, as it turns out, plans to bomb thirteen churches in southern Sweden. The national Church of Sweden has become, in their view, too modernized and the tipping point is, here, a homosexual wedding that is supposed to take place. Only just in time the police realize the implications of the matter and thus far the two narratives are plotwise principally similar. The suggestive difference is the ultimate fate of Anna and her father. In the film a police officer shoots and kills the leader and Anna drives off with the explosives only to commit suicide, but in the literary version of *Before the Frost* the leader ends up shooting his own daughter and gets away.

In essence, then, the literary narrative is much more dystopic where the religiously fundamentalist threat against the democratic society is still out there. As a significant point of reference, on the last pages of the book the twin towers of New York are hit. Another central illustration of dystopia in both narratives is that the whole investigative plot revolves around coincidence. The first murder of the country side tracker was never intended by the leader of the cult, but she was regretfully only in the wrong place at the wrong time. Though had she not been killed, the investigation of the entire fraction would not have commenced. Metaphorically speaking, then, the security of the democratic establishment of society is hanging by a thread. Thus, the narratives are not just unswervingly involved in a discussion about democratic foundation, but indirectly they point towards critical points and, in doing so, they question the status of democratic Sweden.

### 4. Social Symptoms and Divine Violence

In the voice of Mankell, Sweden is a democratic society on the surface, but something seems to be changing alongside Mankell's books about

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Wallander. These ten books take on a discussion about what appears as a social incentive of violence:

How could someone murder an old woman so brutally?  
[...] What was it that was happening now? A subterranean  
rift had suddenly occurred in the Swedish society. Radical  
seismographs registered it. But where did it come from?<sup>10</sup>

Andrew Nestingen – who quotes this passage as well – describes this kind of violence as an emotional response that “adduces the crime as a social symptom, and then uses the crime to raise abstract questions about the underlying historical forces”<sup>11</sup>. Generally, Nestingen is of course faultlessly right that Mankell conceives crime as social and historical, but in this case – if you read on in the passage of the short story in question – there is a reference to another type of rather intangible violence:

Earlier you stole crank handle gramophones. You didn’t  
steel car stereos. For the simple reason that they didn’t ex-  
ist. [...] the rift that had emerged was of a different kind. It  
was about an escalating violence. A brutality that didn’t ask  
whether or not it was necessary.<sup>12</sup>

The escalating violence is, based on the vague incomprehensibility, at first what often puts the investigator Wallander off in distressful reflections about the impenetrable causes of violence. This is, additionally, an illustrative variation of the Swedish unease: an indistinct concept describing inexpressible changes. This insubstantial, neither necessary nor pointless violence comes comparatively close to what Walter Benjamin defines as “divine violence”<sup>13</sup>. Žižek interprets this type of violence as

just the sign of injustice of the world, of the world being  
ethically “out of joint”. This, however, does *not* imply that  
divine justice has a meaning: rather, it is a sign without  
meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Divine violence is not about breaking the law as is the case with direct, physical violence, but divine violence is – as Benjamin writes – rather law-destroying<sup>15</sup>. It goes beyond the whole idea of law and order and, hence, beyond particular social symptom of threats against democracy.

Provocatively, Žižek thus interprets divine violence as *the domain of love*, though in this manner this violence becomes interestingly tangible. Violence is on the one side often condemned as vice, though it is, then, unclear what to put up with all kinds of violence. The police officer that shoots the

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leader of the cult in the cinematic version of *Before the Frost* would be considered neither vice nor criminal, but it underlines general violence as a dialectical stature. Like love, divine violence is doublesided and ambivalent:

love without cruelty is powerless; cruelty without love is blind, a short-lived passion which loses its persistent edge. The underlying paradox is that what makes love angelic, what elevates it over mere unstable and pathetic sentimentality, is its cruelty itself, its link to violence.<sup>16</sup>

At root, this implies that – besides the direct, physical harm – an ambivalent component of violence is reflected in between both the physical violence on the one side and the social variations of violence on the other. This type of violence is not, as in most crime fiction, basic horrible murders or otherwise harmful acts and, however, it is not, as many Scandinavian versions of crime fiction, politically oriented or critical of ideology – it is the violence from which these variations of violence spring. The brutality within this concept does not ask whether or not it is necessary. Yet, it is important to underline that divine violence is nowhere near the religiously based violence in *Before the Frost* or any other type of terrorism<sup>17</sup>. Terror and religious violence clearly has a goal and knows alone that it is necessary, which becomes a question of belief whereas divine violence goes beyond elementary particular belief. This is essentially what becomes interesting in relation to discussions about establishment and disruptions of democratic values.

## 5. Ambivalence and Democracy

We have so far isolated the expressed violence in Mankell's version as, at root, based on a two-tier structure of necessity. The idea of violence as neither necessary nor pointless implies a type of violence that actually can be both, which introduces violence as a culturally and tentatively ambivalent concept. Though perhaps inciting, it becomes clear that there is such a thing as required violence, and this immanent ambivalence is – for better or worse – integrated into Wallander's character<sup>18</sup>. The most apparent example raised by Andrew Nestingen is, of course, Wallander's professional criminalization of the pressuring of women into prostitution in the novel *Sidetracked*, while he himself is having "inebriated sex with local prostitutes" during "drunken trips to Barbados and Thailand"<sup>19</sup>.

This intrinsic ambivalence is not only reflected into commonplace actions, but it is an overall trait of Wallander, who is ineptly caught between two modes of thinking: He is at once the enlightened investigator with trust in positive knowledge as well as an approximation of the suffering and self-sacrificing romanticist. This is most obvious in the cinematic version of *Before the Frost* in a scene when Wallander explains the personal losses as po-

liceman as well as in the novel: “the day you put on the uniform it will always stay there”<sup>20</sup>. With a bent towards opera, a failure to become an artist himself and proclivities towards intuitive insight Wallander from time to time taps into a domain of artistic methods rather than cold empirical data. This character based ambiguousness, then, “is not only an attempt to highlight Wallander’s ambivalence, but also an allegorical register that insists on the ambivalence of Swedish, and Western, global enmeshment with the Third-World Other”<sup>21</sup> – in other words, as well critical of Western focus on rationality.

Here, we basically encounter Mankell’s discussion about modern democracy or lack thereof where Wallander:

in a way has served as a spokesman for a lot of people’s feelings of growing insecurity, anger and healthy insights into the relationship between the constitutional state and democracy.<sup>22</sup>

We find reflections like these within *Before the Frost* as well where a “devastating disorder and lawlessness” is characterized: “We scarcely protect legality any more. What we do is to keep lawlessness within fairly endurable limits”<sup>23</sup>. This is, in many ways, the weak point of democracy that in itself – just as Wallander’s character – can be describe as ambivalent. As Harold E. Pepinsky writes, “democracy is not a formal system, it is no less a real structure. Democracy is a pattern by which actor’s motives change in relation to one another”<sup>24</sup>. These motives have – in the view of Mankell – changed towards the worse during the 90’s where the Scandinavian welfare state and the state of justice have been lost as fundamental values. Nestingen agrees on this point referring to Mankell’s solidarity as a means of correction:

Mankell avers that solidarity is the only attitude that can foster the ethical relationships necessary for resisting and reforming the unjust dynamics of economic globalization [...]. The word Mankell uses to depict this solidarity is *förnuft* [reason, ed.], which [...] is better understood as an affective, first-order orientation and affective comprehension that precedes reason.<sup>25</sup>

Again, we here come across the already revealed critique of reason in Mankell’s novels from the point of view of an affective, somewhat aesthetic sensibility. This notion of solidarity has close resemblances with Pepinsky’s definition of democracy as organized responsiveness and violence as the opposite, unresponsiveness: “‘Responsiveness’ means doing things *with* people rather than *to* or *for* people [...] Violence entails a willful disregard for one’s



effect on others [...] Violence or disregard for others may be direct and personal or indirect and structural”<sup>26</sup>. Voiced by Mankell, then, a democracy and a welfare state without solidarity leads to structural violence or what Žižek refers to as systemic and objective violence<sup>27</sup>. Democracy or responsiveness, then, in terms of Pepinsky “rests on the perception that actors’ objectives are constantly open to negotiation with the persons affected by the action. “Violence” begins where democracy ends”<sup>28</sup>.

This is, with its narrative dispatch in an act of violence, as well where crime fiction begins!

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> H Mankell, *Pyramiden* (The Pyramid), Leopard Förlag, Stockholm, 2006, p. 9, my translation.

<sup>2</sup> H Mankell, *Innan frosten* (Before the Frost), Leopard Förlag, Stockholm, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> In relation to the differences between the eight novels about Kurt Wallander and the novel and film in question here, it is, of course, noteworthy that *Before the Frost* and the collection of short stories in *Pyramiden* are somewhat of appendices to the preceding novels.

<sup>4</sup> For a development of this point see K T Hansen, ‘Identifying the Junction. The Idea of Reason in Fantasy’ in *Marvelous Fantasy*, J R Christensen (ed.), Aalborg University Press, Aalborg, 2009, in press. Here, I draw attention to Risto Sarrinen’s highly usable concept *secular theodicy*, which describes the fact that we are still asking the same question after secularization of society with the obvious difference that we are no longer calling God into question. Now, the welfare state is brought to a point in Scandinavia where we consider violence as based on a lack of welfare, which results in a welfare theodicy. “Here the agent of judgment is no longer God, but the people”, as writes Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, Picador, New York, 2008, p. 187. See as well R Saari-nen’s ‘The Surplus of Evil in Welfare Society: Contemporary Scandinavian Crime Fiction’. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, vol. 42, summer 2003, pp. 131-135.

<sup>5</sup> S Žižek, op. cit., p. 10. Žižek is, as he continues, highly critical of this fascination with subjective violence: “Doesn’t it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them”.

<sup>6</sup> The domestic bliss of southern Sweden, particularly around and in Ystad, is most predominant in the cinematic version of *Before the Frost*. The Wallander series’ aestheticised and picturesque representation of Ystad has – along with the literary descriptions – grown into a profiling touristic marketing tool.

<sup>7</sup> E A Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, New York, Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1984, p. 571.

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- <sup>8</sup> H Mankell, op. cit., p. 340, my translation.
- <sup>9</sup> A Nestingen, op. cit., p. 226.
- <sup>10</sup> H Mankell, *Pyramiden* (The Pyramid), p. 139, my translation.
- <sup>11</sup> A Nestingen, op. cit., p. 239.
- <sup>12</sup> H Mankell, op. cit., p. 139.
- <sup>13</sup> W Benjamin, 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*, W Benjamin, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1965, p. 59.
- <sup>14</sup> S Žižek, op. cit., p. 200.
- <sup>15</sup> W Benjamin, op. cit., p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> S Žižek, op. cit., p. 204.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 185.
- <sup>18</sup> This is a point raised by Nestingen as well and I am, here, indebted to his character analysis of Wallander. See Nestingen, op. cit., p. 243-246.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 243.
- <sup>20</sup> H Mankell, *Innan frosten* (Before the Frost), p. 26, my translation.
- <sup>21</sup> A Nestingen, op. cit., p. 244.
- <sup>22</sup> H Mankell, *Pyramiden* (The Pyramid), p. 9, my translation.
- <sup>23</sup> H Mankell, *Innan frosten* (Before the Frost), p. 49, my translation.
- <sup>24</sup> H E Pepinsky, *The Geometry of Violence and Democracy*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 1991, p. 125.
- <sup>25</sup> A Nestingen, op. cit., p. 230.
- <sup>26</sup> H E Pepinsky, op. cit., p. 16-17. Pepinsky refers to the Norwegian word 'ansvar', which semantically works similarly in both Danish and Swedish, as a root of inspiration for his 'responsiveness'.
- <sup>27</sup> S Žižek, op. cit., p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> H E Pepinsky, op. cit., p. 86.

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